

black card

intelligent luxury | december 08



Undiscovered Mexico

Exploring the Baja Peninsula,
the hot new destination

Art, style and destruction

The party of the year in Paris

Restaurant revolution

How French chefs are taking
over London

Look sharp

Why smart tailoring
is back in fashion

Snow patrol

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this winter

Red hot

The insider's guide
to Moscow

Snow patrol

Whatever your tastes, ability and budget, there's a destination to suit every skier. Intrepid and rugged or luxurious and pampered, Adam Ruck whizzes through the options on two continents

R **EMOTE & RUGGED** Canadian Heli-ski

Skiing is all about maths. If a resort has 15,000 beds and its lifts carry 5,000 skiers an hour, you get queues. If it doubles its lift capacity to ease the queues, you get crowded pistes and tracks through all the fresh snow before lunchtime. However, if a resort sleeps 18 and has a six-seater lift that will transport you in minutes to any summit you like in an exclusive ski area of 6,000 square miles, then you are heli-skiing in British Columbia, with fresh tracks guaranteed many days after a snowfall. For those who prefer not to share the powder, this is close to heaven. The only problem is availability. Book now for the winter after next is the standard advice. This winter, however, will probably see cancellations aplenty.

The maths doesn't end here. This kind of holiday is priced by the vertical foot, as a measure of flying time, and includes an allowance that you might easily exhaust in three days. After that the meter is ticking, and you need to be aware of the rate from the start. There are varying refund formulae that can be applied in case of bad weather, as well as different configurations of helicopter, which may or may not suit





your group size. If this all sounds much too complicated, you should consult James Orr, a UK-based agent who has wide experience of working with a broad range of Canadian operators. This winter, Orr recommends Northern Escape, located near Terrace in northern British Columbia. 'The six-seater helicopter is a nice size for a ski group,' he says. The resort town of Revelstoke in the Selkirk mountains offers an appealing combination of outstanding resort skiing and great heli. James Orr can arrange tailor-made packages, including transatlantic flights and a few days of warm-up skiing at the celebrated Whistler resort.

The rhythm of the heli-ski day is fast, furious and repetitive – for obvious commercial reasons, the operators are keen to offer as many runs as possible. Lunch is a chilly picnic: there are no cosy glühwein huts on the mountain, and no loos – so, ladies, go easy on the coffee at breakfast. The fat skis specifically for powder snow are so helpful these days that you don't need to be an ace to consider a heli-ski holiday. You do need to be keen, however, and fit. In fact, the less expert you are, the fitter you need to be, because it is hauling one's tired body out of the snow that really drains the energy.

James Orr Heliski 01799 516964

www.heliski.co.uk

SECRET LUXURY Ste Foy Tarentaise, France

The luxury ski chalet has a lot to answer for. We put on weight instead of losing it and without the iron will of a monk, we may easily neglect our skiing. These two perils are linked, as I was reminded last January when a close friend and insatiable skier (or so I thought) chose to miss out on a morning's powder-skiing in favour of lying flat out on the leather sofa at Chalet Merlo (*below*) watching Serena

Williams live from Australia on an immense flatscreen TV. 'It's such a fantastic sofa,' my friend announced at breakfast. 'I just can't believe the skiing will be as good.' Well, I'm sorry, it was. I know, because after following Chalet Merlo's private mountain guide through a silent forest filled with lightest-gossamer snow all the way to Chalet Merlo's door, I got my sofa time too.

Ste Foy is a low-key refuge in the French Tarentaise which is tucked away among the chain of ski resorts that >



Chalet Merlo at Ste Foy Tarentaise



Chalet Yellowstone at Ste Foy Tarentaise

< stretches from Val d'Isère to Valmorel. It looks across the valley at the Les Arcs ski area, and, on blizzard days, instructors from Val d'Isère bring groups here for secret powder-skiing in the woods. However, few skiers actually stay at Ste Foy for the simple reason that it has very little accommodation; it built its lifts in anticipation of planning permission and, with permission yet to be granted, it remains the ski resort without a resort. But really, who needs a resort when you have two magnificent luxury chalets competing to seduce you with Champagne and canapés, rose petals sprinkled in your bath, and chauffeured 4x4 vehicles to shuttle you to and from skiing or shopping – wherever and whenever you desire?

Chalet Yellowstone, just two minutes from the nursery slope, is run by the market leader in ski luxury, Descent, and sleeps 12 people. Chalet Merlo, in the rustic hamlet of Le Miroir, also sleeps 12, and has a near-identical neighbour, Chalet Pecchio, which is also available for larger groups. The Merlo team can arrange helicopter transfers to and from Geneva airport, avoiding weekend traffic jams on the N90 and allowing you to maximise time on the slopes – or the sofa. Merlo also has its own superbly equipped gym in an

outbuilding, so there is really no excuse for laziness.

Chalet Merlo 0845 324 3521

www.chaletmerlo.eu

Chalet Yellowstone 020 7384 3854

www.descent.co.uk

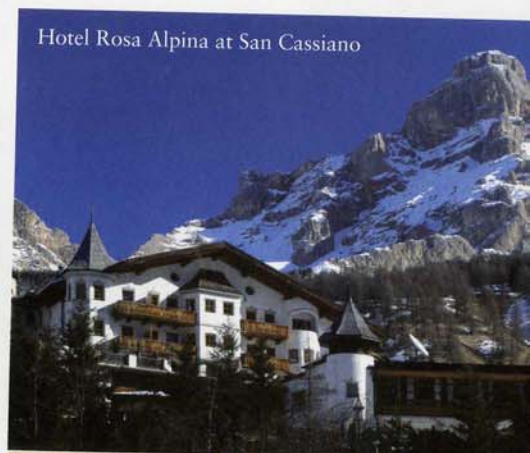
THE GOOD LIFE

San Cassiano, Alta Badia, Italy

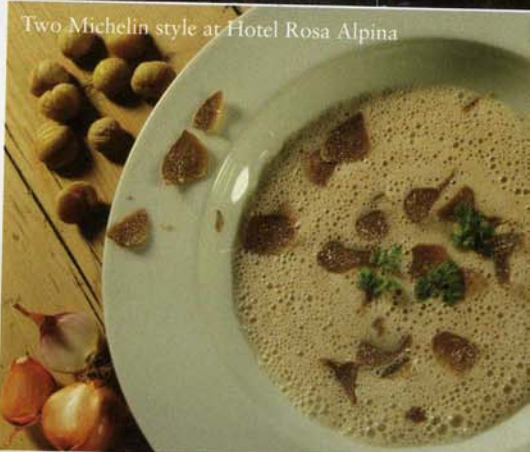
Move over, Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Your long-held status as the bolthole of choice among Italian skiers with a taste for the good life has been usurped by your country cousins in the neighbouring valley of Alta Badia. Zooming Google Earth to pinpoint the crucible of this revolution, we find the pretty little Dolomite village of San Cassiano. Its centrepiece is the Hotel Rosa Alpina, home of the Pizzinini family for many generations, which has blossomed into a pleasure dome of extreme refinement, with a rare combination of spa and gastronomy to complement mile upon mile of delightful skiing through the breathtaking Dolomite mountains.

Where Paolo and Daniela Pizzinini have led, others in Alta Badia have followed, though they're having trouble catching up. The Rosa Alpina's slap-up restaurant, the St Hubertus, is



Hotel Rosa Alpina at San Cassiano



Two Michelin style at Hotel Rosa Alpina



The spa at Hotel Rosa Alpina

< overseen by the brilliant chef Norbert Niederkofler, and has won two Michelin stars for its exceptional food. Daniela's department is the spa, and at Rosa Alpina she has created a luxurious facility without parallel in the region. One could easily forget skiing altogether and luxuriate in the spa for days on end, enjoying the ultra-soothing Cleopatra bath, delicious wraps flavoured with Alpine herbs, and treatments that use locally grown ingredients. Rosa Alpina has the most comfortable loungers in the business. Wake me up for breakfast, will you?

These days, the day-to-day running of Rosa Alpina is in the hands of Paolo and Daniela's son Hugo and his wife Ursula. They run the show with real panache, offering guests ski itineraries that invariably lead to a superb lunch – at Piz La Ila, for example, whose dashing owner Maurizio brings in fresh seafood from the Venetian port of Chioggia every morning. Make time in your schedule too for lunch at beautiful Rifugio Scotoni, half-way down the delightful ski-ramble from Lagazuoi cable car. This run fizzles out near a bus stop half a mile from the nearest lift, but Hugo will arrange for a team of Lippizaner horses to be there, and offer a ski tow.

For a really sybaritic experience, Rosa Alpina offers a dine-around arrangement that works particularly well in Alta Badia, which has the highest concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants of any mountain resort area. You'll need to up your work rate on the slopes, though.

Rosa Alpina 00 39 0471 849500
www.rosalpina.it. Stays at Rosa Alpina can be booked through Select Collection (0207 491 7171 www.selectcollection.co.uk) or Relais & Chateaux (00 800 20 00 00 02 www.relaischateaux.com)



Chairlift at Oberlech

CHIC & CLASSY – Lech, Austria

There is no end to the resourcefulness of the citizens of Lech, in western Austria, in dreaming up new ways to take the effort out of skiing. Their resort is the supreme Alpine comfort zone. Fast-moving chair lifts with wind shields, heated seats and a moving carpet to cushion the impact of chair on back of knee; perfectly combed snow with the texture of fine corduroy; a lift to take you to the lift in the morning, bypassing a staircase of, oh, at least 20 steps. Not to mention artificial snow-making everywhere in case the weather turns warm. Small wonder that you see warning signs on the motorway advising skiers that Lech and its sister resort Zürs are no longer selling lift tickets; they have enough skiers to be going along with, thank you very much. But if these comforts sound a little synthetic, too much like American-style pampering, try the distinctly traditional pleasures of lunch at the Alter Goldener Berg restaurant at Oberlech. Mind your head as you enter – the doorway was built in 1486, when they weren't quite so tall as today. Equally quaint is the covered wooden bridge over the river at Lech

where sleigh horses shelter from the snow, beneath the elegant profile of the onion-domed 17th-century church tower.

Loyalties are divided between Lech's best hotels. Princess Diana took her boys to the Arlberg. The Royal Houses of Norway and the Netherlands prefer the traditional splendour of the Gasthof Post. Caroline of Monaco stays at the Lorünser in nearby Zürs, a high-altitude colony of expensive hotels particularly appreciated by new Russians. The same description might also apply to Oberlech, except this expensive hotel colony attracts a quieter family clientele and has no road running through it, only gentle pistes and a hilarious toboggan run served by a cablecar late into the evening.

When it comes to ski boots, however, all agree. The only place to have them fitted and handmade is at the Strolz store, on the high street in Lech. Drinks are served while you stand waiting for the hot foam to mould itself around your feet. Lech stops at nothing to make us comfortable.

Ski Solutions (020 7471 7777 www.skisolutions.com) can arrange tailor-made holidays to Lech